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be sold; touching chain or kettle gave one the status of a guest; to throw the kettle out of the hut was a supreme insult which could even require blood vengeance.

Besides the cult of the hearth, the veneration of trees was widespread in the Caucasus. The pagan cult had its rites and community prayers and offerings, and these were usually performed near a sacred grove or tree. In all Georgia there are sacred groves and trees near the Christian churches and sanctuaries. No one was allowed to cut down these trees, or to cut off a single branch, even in areas where wood was scarce, as this would entail the wrath of God.

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In Georgia there are traces of the worship of a Mother-god; under the name "mother of the soil" (adgilis deda) a female deity of the earth is worshipped. In the many legends about Queen Tamar, who has a place in the pantheon of the Pshav, elements of the same cult have been preserved. A deity of the woods, protector of wild animals, is called T'q'ashi mapa ("king of the woods") by the Mingrelians, Apsat (borrowed from Osset Awsati) by the Svan, Ochop'int'e by the Khevsur, Azhvepsha by the Abkhaz, Mezith ("forest-god") by the Circassians. The latter two peoples also knew a patron of the smiths, fire and iron (Abkh. Shoshu, Circ. Tlepsh). There were numerous other deities: of natural phenomena (sun, moon,

C. G. 776 thunder), often identified with Christian saints (e.g. the god of thunder with St. Elias or St. George); patrons of agriculture, of cattle breeding, of horsemen, of thieves, etc.; and also a large array of spirits, angels, witches, and wood-giants; and finally a variety of superstitions, of which may be mentioned C. G. [754] the fear of the "evil eye."

The religious worship of the Georgian mountain tribes has reverted to their ancient C G [778] tribal religion, veiled by Christian terminology. Their places of worship, called khat'i "icon" or dzhvari "cross," are small huts of rough stones, mostly standing in sacred groves. Their only adornment are pieces of cloth or horns of the Caucasian capricorn as votive offerings. The same words denote also the supernatural power residing in these huts; it is conceived as a sort of mediator between mankind and the supreme god called Morige "he who allots, distributes." Each village and each clan have their khat'i, and each tribe, too, had a common khat'i; e.g., that of the Pshav is called Lashris dzhvari, that of the Mtiul Lomisas dzhvari. Every member of the clan considers himself a "serf" (q'ma) of the khat'i, which may send him success, or disease and death. Each khat'i possessed pastures, arable land and woods where it was C. G. 793 forbidden to fell a single tree. Attached to it was a body of functionaries who were appointed temporarily or held their office by

# THE RELIGION OF THE OSSETS

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The majority of the Ossets profess the orthodox Christian religion. Only a small minority, the Digors, in the western part of the country, are Mohammedans. However, both religions appear mixed to a large extent with old pagan conceptions, rites and customs. The Christians know the names of Christ (Digor Kiriste, Iran Tshysysti), the "Mother Mary" and some of the Christian saints; they go to church and observe certain Christian rites, holidays and fasts; but at the same time they worship and pray to their pagan gods and spirits, sacrificing oxen, goats and sheep, and keep their old pagan holidays.

In a similar way the Mohammedans have a very superficial connection with the Mohammedan religion. They know the name of the prophet, perform the prescribed ablutions, keep Friday as a holiday and Ramazan, the month of fasting. However, like the Christians, they also worship their old pagan gods and celebrate their own traditional festivals.

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Both Christian and Mohammedan Ossets believe in the existence of a high God, an invisible Supreme Being, ruling the world from heaven. His name is Khutsau, and he is often called "the God of the Gods." But the Ossets have only a very vague idea of his nature. They are primarily devoted to the cult of deities which are closer to their hearts and to their

c.o. 776 naive and primitive way of thinking. These are popular creations, mainly tutelary deities and spirits of various realms of nature, such as Fälwära, the guardian of domestic animals; Buduri-Usad, the god of the fields; Khualar-Dar, the god of the harvest: Ävsati, the protector of the deer, the ibex and other game; Donbettyr (Donbettär), the guardian spirit of the waters, the fish and fishermen; Safa, the tutelary spirit of the chain which hangs about the hearth and is so holy an object in an Osset's house, that its removal can bring about the death of the inhabitants of the house and its c.o. theft can lead to a blood feud; Runibari, a god [753] of health (who brings disease and wards it off); c.o. the Geniata or Fazbadata, the guardian spirits [769] of families and the spirits (ghosts) of deceased souls, who are supposed to watch over, and further the well-being of, their families on earth. It is characteristic of the mentality of the Ossets that one of their guardian spirits, Saureg-Gsua by name, protects even thieves and robbers.

However, functions of guardianship are also attributed to some of the Christian saints who have become prominent figures in the religion of the Ossets. Vastyrdzhi (Digor Vasgergi), Saint George, protects travelers, controls military roads and mountain paths, and in contrast to the spirit Saurge-Gsua mentioned above, persecutes thieves and robbers and punishes perjurers and murderers. Vatsilla,

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Saint Elijah, (Surrian Il'ia), is the lord of thunder and lightning. Anyone who has been struck by lightning, is thought to have offended this saint and therefore to have been hit by his bullet. Here Elijah has taken the place of the original pagan god of the thunderstorm who hurls his thunderbolt, the lightning, against the dragon which is the cloud, and releases the waters which the demon had kept imprisoned. This is proved by the fact that the same function has been assigned to Elijah and especially to the angel Gabriel in the popular belief of Armenia, where this old Indo-Iranian myth of the slaying of the dragon by the god of the thunderstorm is preserved in a form that is still more complete than that of the rather simplified and less colorful Ossetic version. (Cf. Manuk Abeghian, Der armenische Volksglaube, [Leipsig, 1890], pp. 78ff., and B. Geiger, Die Amesha Spentas, Sitzungsberichte der Wiener Akad. d. Wiss., Vol. 176 [1916], pp. 65ff.) The relatives and friends of a person killed by a lightning express joy and sing and dance, suppressing all tears and sadness over the death of the person, from fear of making Vatsilla angry; this strange custom is obviously the result of a later development of this version of the myth. Like this attitude towards the deceased, the manner in which he is buried also belongs to the sphere of pagan popular belief. The body is either buried at the place of the accident, or it is placed on a

C. O. 766

C.O. 766 two-wheeled carriage drawn by two goats, and the place where the animals stop is thought to have been chosen by Vatsilla. At the grave a black male goat is slaughtered and his skin is hung up on a long pole.

C.O. 776 It is noteworthy that there exists a strange discrepancy between these two saints and the Vastyrdzhi and Vatsilla of the legends of the Narti.[1] Apart from the fact that these legends tell of groups of seven Vastyrdzhi and seven Vatsilla, we are confronted here not only with a difference of numbers, but also with an essential contrast between the characters and functions of the saints and their namesakes in the legends. There appears in the legends, in addition to the groups of seven, two single Vastyrdzhi who is involved in a very un holy affair. He attempts to seduce the mother of one of the Narti families and having been rejected, he waits until her death, visits her grave together with a stallion and a dog, and she gives birth to a girl, a col' and a dog's whelp. The behavior which is ascribed to the Vastyrdzhi in this story is fantastic and repelling. However, the role which the groups of seven Vastyrdzhi and seven Vatsilla play in the legends of the Narti, is no less surprising, though it is free from actions of obscene character. Some of the mightiest heroes of the Narti show an extremely hostile attitude towards these two groups and kill some of them at accidental encounters. They act in the same way against the Zäd (Izäd) and Daväg (Idaväg), who

[1] [i.e. a tribe of mythical heroes, cf. ost. II b, pp. 576-582 -- Analyst]

C.O. 776 seem to be the same sort of angel. Strangely enough, God hesitated for some time before granting the requests of these groups to punish the brutal attackers.

It seems evident that the original conception of the Vastyrdzhi and Vatsilla in the popular religion of the Ossets was that of two members of the host of tutelary spirits and this conception is still distinctly recognizable, although they have been elevated to the rank of Christian saints. There is very little doubt that the relation between the Narti heroes and these two tutelary spirits, as it appears in the Narti legends, is the result of an arbitrary distortion of the original conception.

The Ossets worship two other saints: Tutyr, the protector and ruler of wolves, who obviously is identical with Saint Theodore, and the wonderworking, miraculous killer Nikkola who corresponds to Saint Nicholas.

C.O. 776 Besides their Christian and Mohammedan holidays, the Ossets celebrate a number of festivals of pagan character which are dedicated to their popular gods, or rather, spirits. They make the distinction between "male" and "female" C.O. festivals. The male festivals are attended only [782] by men offering bloody sacrifices, whereas at the female festivals which are celebrated only by women, the sacrificial gifts consist of milk C.O. and cheese. Some of the feasts are celebrated at 776 home, others at or near places considered 778 sacred, such as mountain plateaus, caves, groves, or trees. Among the sacred places and

c. o. 796 hearth-fire, and the master of the house recites a long prayer in which he gives thanks to God and asks for blessings for the coming year. During the night the young people go from house to house, throwing corn into the houses, singing and expressing good wishes for prosperity and happiness. At daybreak of New Year's day the master of the house kindles a fire of straw in the courtyard in honor of his deceased parents, who thereby are provided with the necessary fire for the whole year. The day is spent in much merry making. eating and drinking.

c. o. 796 782 776 Only one day, the Wednesday between Christmas and New Year, is dedicated to the worship of an evil spirit, the Devil. The ceremony starts in the evening with the killing of a lamb in front of the door of the house. The spirit is invoked not to do any harm to the cattle and to the other property of the master of the house and to accept an offering of a piece of roasted meat of a lamb and a glass of brandy. During that night one should strictly avoid mentioning the name of the Supreme God, lest the wrath of the evil spirit be provoked. The Devil proper of the Ossets, who is called Khairag is like the well-known figure of the devil of other countries, a good-natured foolish fellow who can easily be duped (der dumme Teufel in German).

c. o. 771 177 This survey of the most characteristic features of the religion of the Ossets,

* [cf. cat. 116, pp. 565-574 -- Analyst]

8: Lužbetak E-4 (no date) 1951 RH1 Caucasia RH1



sheep is slaughtered and a second feast is given at which the husband- and wife-to-be are present. The elder of the village (*khevis-beri*)[4], presides and then recites the special engagement prayer: "Glory to you, George, Angel of the Oak, Lasharis-Dzhbari, and Queen Tamara! George, Angel of the Oak, bless this young couple! Make them happy, rich and prosperous!"[35] After this the *mkepari*[36] are chosen from among the relatives of both partners, whose task it is to collect gifts for the betrothed. The Pshavs do not give their daughters a special dowry, these gifts and the *satavno* taking its place.[37] From now on the suitor is allowed to pay his future wife frequent visits.[38]

There is very little difference to be noted in the OSSETINE matchmaking and betrothal.[39] At first a good friend (generally a woman) of the young man's family is sent to the parents of the girl to learn, unnoticed if possible, about the possiblity of a marriage. If the "spy" returns with a favourable answer, two official matchmakers are sent, generally elderly friends of the family. All dealings are kept secret until the girl's father consents. The town-crier is then notified, for it is his duty and privilege to publicize all engagements. Then the matchmakers bring to the girl's family gifts and the *kalym*, and, as usual, the engagement is celebrated by a feast.[40]

The engagement customs of the KUMYKS are about the same as those of the Chechens.[41] In Balkaria it is the agreement regarding the *kalym* that constitutes the essence of the betrothal.[42]

## 2. Conclusions regarding Matchmaking and Betrothal

(1) All North Caucasians and immediate neighbours have the custom of formal betrothal of one sort or another. (2) Nowhere is the marriage arrangement a private affair. The two persons concerned are either passive, or if they do act, they are simply cooperating in a family matter. (3) Official go-betweens are usually employed. (4) The initiative is taken among all North Caucasians and neighbouring peoples by the male side. (5) Although the mother plays a surprisingly important part in the engagement customs, the final decision rests with the father.

The premarital arrangements of the Caucasians have a strongly patriarchal character. It is the father who has the final word in matchmaking. Moreover,

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[35] Makalatija, *l. c.* The sacred oak referred to is supposed to be on Mount Lashari in the central part of Pshavia and is tied to heaven with a golden chain (Makalatija, *op. cit.*, p. 103).

[36] Makalatija, *l. c.*

[37] Every girl, while still small, receives a calf as her own property. All the profit she makes by raising the calf becomes her property too.

[38] Makalatija, *l. c.*

[39] Dubrovin, I, i, pp. 329—332.

[40] Hahn, *Bilder aus dem Kaukasus*, pp. 40 f.

[41] For a fine description of Kumykian matchmaking and engagement see Semenov, "Očerki narodnych obyčaev Kumykov Terskoj Oblasti," *Terskij Sbornik*, II (1892), No. 2, Part 2 pp. 68—71; Dubrovin, *Istorija*, I, i, p. 637.

A. Karzulov, "Bolkari na Kavkazě," SMOMPK, XXXVIII (1908), No. 1, p. 146.

[4] [in Pshavia, southern Caucasia -- Analyst]

8: Lužbetak E-4 (no date) 1951 RHl Caucasia RHl



585 [776] (7) In a number of instances we have noticed that the dagger or sword was used in connection with the marriage ceremony. The best-man took the bride around the hearth and each time he struck the chain with his dagger. The bride had to enter her new home under an arch of swords or with a dagger or club held above her head. This wedding custom, too, has a religious basis. The household gods of the bride's family have become exceedingly jealous of the bride, because by marrying she has united herself to another family and will now worship other ancestors, abandoning her own. These jealous godlets realize that the best time to enter her new home and to cause countless harm is simultaneously with the bride. Fortunately, these household gods are afraid of daggers.[114] [845] Among the Georgian mountaineers, a mother after having given birth to a child will keep a sword under the pillow as a protection against aerial spirits.[115] Spirits are afraid of the sword for several reasons—at least such is our conjecture. The God of Iron, of the Sword, and of the Hearth-Chain is one and the same god, called Safa. This sword ceremony may perhaps insure [823] Safa's protection against jealous godlets. It may also insure the protection of [769] the departed because *iron* is a means of contacting ancestors. In Ossetia on the [787] "feast of the dedication of clothing" clothes are consecrated and sent to the netherworld by means of an iron knife.[116] The Ingushi get in contact with their departed by means of iron tongs.[117]

(8) The other marriage ceremonies are likewise mainly pastoral in character: horse-racing, submission to the husband, wishes for a rich progeny but always with a disproportion of "nine boys to every blue-eyed girl." Finally, the long elaborate and expensive wedding itself is typical of pastoral peoples.

[606] There are, however, a few traces of a so-called mother-right culture. The rôle played by the mother-in-law in the ceremonies, as we have stressed *(supra,* p. 125), is indeed not inconsistent with the position of the mother of the household in a patriarchal family, but, we must admit that their astounding importance gives them a suspiciously matriarchal colouring: in the ceremonies described, it is the Lesghian mother who welcomes the bride into the house as if she were the head of the family. It is the mother who holds her by the hand as she crosses the threshold. It is the mother's brother who led the bride's horse in the Ingiloi procession from her home to that of her groom. It is the mother who puts the honey into the mouth of the bride as a sign that the bride has a sweet life ahead of her under such an amiable mistress as her mother-in-law. And we should not forget that in the Lesghian engagement it was the mother who presented the engagement gifts which concluded the betrothal contract.[118]

595 585 114 We cannot conclude this chapter without briefly refuting some of Kovalevskij's assumptions. Like so many anthropologists of his day, he was inclined to find traces of an epoch older than that of patriarchy, and older than that of

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[114] For the custom among the Ossetes see Kovalevskij, *Coutume contemp.*, pp. 170 f.

[115] Cf. Reineggs, *op. cit.*, II, p. 112 f.

[116] Kokiev, *Slepovye soeruženija*, (Vladikavkaz, 1928), p. 38.

[117] Baddeley, *op. cit.*, II, p. 120.

[118] *Supra*, p. 103.